

Ruins in the Expanded Field

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Abstract

This paper applies the Klein Group form used by Rosalind Krauss in her essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” to the field of ruins. The opposition utilized to create the ruin Klein Group is the opposition between vanished and intact. The paper proceeds by classifying and discussing each of the possibilities opened up by the expanded field: ruins (not-vanished; not-intact), consecrated sites (vanished; not-vanished), ruin-reproduction (vanished; intact), and finally the “necroaesthetical ruin” (intact; not-intact). The expanded field and the political and aesthetic implications thereof are discussed primarily in conversation with Paolo Virno’s “Deja Vu and the End of History,” as well as Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics,” and Andreas Huyssen’s “Nostalgia for Ruins.”

Keywords

Necropolitics, Ruins, End of history, Paolo Virno, Aesthetics

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Jake Romm

Introduction

I am walking in a field, it is day. In the distance there is a pile of stones, and I begin to walk towards it. As I approach, it occurs to me that this pile of stones is not a “pile” at all, but a dilapidated structure – if I squint, tilt my head slightly, I can see the remnants of its internal logic. It is, really, a ruin. There, off to the right, is a plaque confirming the thought, “...Stone, c.1300.” As I get closer, I’m able to touch the stones, feel the rough surfaces, the sharp-edged nooks and crannies – testaments to time’s work. But, what’s this? A stone, or what looks like a stone, but the surface is smooth, the edges rubbery – still hard but softer than stone has any reason to be. Is this a ruin, or something else? This “stone,” whatever it is, is clearly intended to look like the other stones – it must have been intentionally placed, just so, in the ruined structure. But the work of time is not apparent on this “stone” – it is in the ruin, but not of it. The other stones, are they stones or “stones?”; ruin or, something else? Is this a ruin at all or some contemporary intervention? To what, then, does “Stone, c. 1300” refer if neither is true?

In August 2020, Russia presented a three-dimensional model of the ancient city of Palmyra, as a part of its preparations to reconstruct (or, in their words, “restore”) the archeological site’s famous Arch of Triumph and Temple of Bel, which had been destroyed by ISIS in 2015 (al-Khateb 2021). As a part of this reconstruction, a team of Russian scientists will compare stone samples taken from the site with stone taken from a modern quarry, which will in turn aid in the selection of material to be used for the reconstruction of the destroyed elements of the site.

In 2017, the National Museum of Damascus completed a “restoration” (again, a reconstruction) of the Lion of Al-lāt, a limestone statue partially destroyed by ISIS in 2015 (UNESCO World Heritage Center 2017). The reconstructed Lion incorporates both original limestone parts and parts created using a 3D printer and nylon powder (Cascone 2018). The two parts, the new and the ruin, do not look even remotely similar, do not even remotely mesh, creating a strange almost cubist effect in the finished product.

What are we to make of these “restorations?” These mixtures of the old and new, these ruins which are no longer ruins? This paper applies Rosalind Krauss’s methodology from her now

foundational essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” to the concept of the ruin in order to explore the various as yet un- or under-articulated concepts within the ruins-theoretical discourse.

The choice of ruin here is not arbitrary. As Walter Benjamin writes, “In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting,” (Benjamin 2003, 177-178) and so when examining the ruin and its related concepts, it is not merely the stones that are at stake, but history itself. And now, at the so-called “end of history” that never seems to come, with all its violent conflagrations and waves of reaction, ruins, as the stuff of history, are becoming contested political and aesthetic sites in new ways. Of all the concepts in the expanded field constructed in this paper, it is the “necroaesthetical ruin” (explored in the final section) – typified by the foregoing Palmyra examples – that most clearly points to the feeling of futurelessness endemic to the “end of history” and most clearly elucidates the political stakes of the ruin and the attendant expanded field.

The Expanded Field, Introduced

In 1979, Rosalind Krauss asked us to consider what, exactly, is a sculpture. Or rather, she asked us to consider what, exactly, is *not* a sculpture. What is not a sculpture but is meaningfully *like* a sculpture. What is not a sculpture but is referred to as sculpture. What is not a sculpture but is an occupant of the same conceptual field. The questions were posed as a response to what Krauss identified as an overextension of the word sculpture, an application of the term to works that were not sculpture as she understood it. This overextension, Krauss writes, was not an exercise in “vanguard-aesthetics” but rather an exercise in “historicism” (Krauss 1979, 30). That is, the overextension of the term sculpture serves as a way to subsume the new under a familiar heading and to sterilize the new in the process. “[W]e are comforted,” she writes, “by this perception of sameness, this strategy for reducing anything foreign in either time or space, to what we already know and are” (Krauss 1979, 30). Sculpture, like any other art-form, has its “own set of rules, which though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change” (Krauss 1979, 36). Krauss located this set of rules, this “internal logic,” in the fundamental opposition of not-landscape and not-architecture. That is, sculpture lay as an “ontological absence” created out of the opposition between these two negativities. But, the terms “not-landscape” and “not-architecture” also implied their affirmative opposites – “landscape” and “architecture.” Thus Krauss posited her famous

“expanded field” – a conceptual framework built upon these oppositions that helps us to understand and articulate the different types of works that had (erroneously) fallen under the heading of “sculpture.” The expanded field was conceptualized as a Klein Group (see Figure 1) (Krauss 1979, 38).¹ The field, so conceptualized, opened up three additional possibilities: marked sites, site-construction, and axiomatic structures.

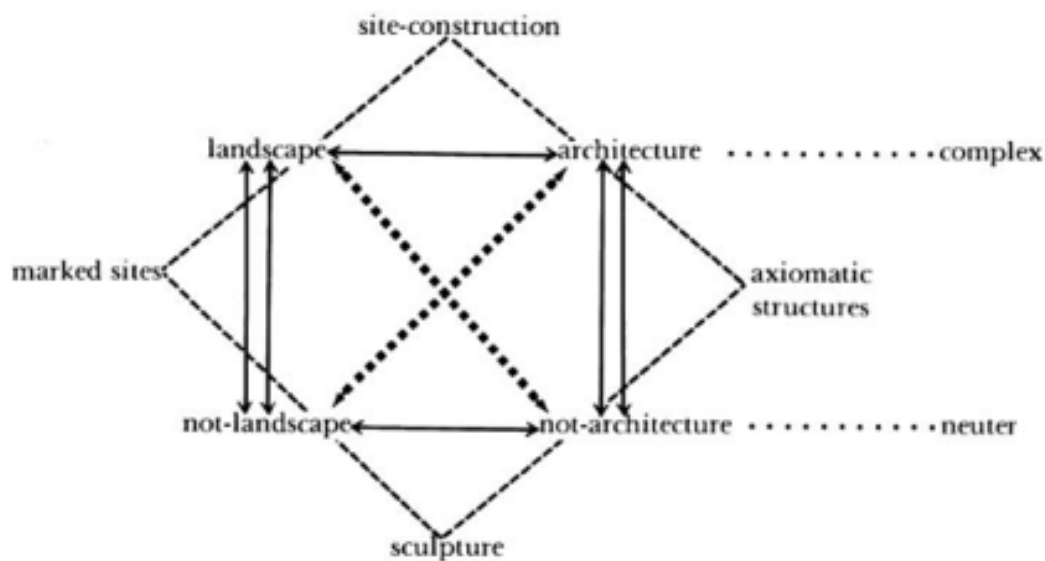


Figure 1

These three new concepts were not born from the concept of sculpture, as one may reasonably assume, but rather from the fundamental negative opposition from which sculpture itself was born (and indeed, it was locating this negative opposition – and in turn, locating the structural logic of the form of sculpture as such – which was Krauss’ primary focus).

Since the publication of Krauss’s essay, the expanded field has become something of a trope in critical literature. There now exist pieces on photography (Baker 2008, 175-189), pottery (Feldman 2019, 9), architecture (Berman and Burnham 2012), writing (RMIT University 2019), and “memory sites” (Huyssen 2009, 94-109)² all in the expanded field. But if the expanded field has become a trope, it is only on the strength of its explicatory value. The Klein Group is adaptable to all manner of fields provided there exist terms similarly expressible by virtue of oppositions.

One field where Krauss’s framework is as yet unapplied, or as yet unapplied in systematic fashion, is the field of ruins. The problem facing our conceptual understanding of ruins,

though, is somewhat distinct from the one Krauss sought to address. Where Krauss was responding to an overextension of the term sculpture, this paper seeks to respond not just to an overextension of the term ruin, but also to a lack of clarity on the nature of the certain concepts which may not currently go by the name of “ruin,” but which still require explication within a ruin-theoretical discourse. Bringing these concepts to light will not only provide a richer understanding of the ruin and its related concepts but will also help to uncover the as yet unexplored (necro)political implications of certain concepts in the expanded field.

Establishing the Expanded Field

In order to establish our expanded field, we must first ask, what are ruins? In what state do ruins exist, and can this state be expressed in terms of a fundamental opposition? A ruin cannot, clearly, be a completely intact structure, one which has suffered no decay. Regardless of the structure’s social use, we would not call an intact structure a ruin, but would rather simply refer to it as the structure itself. “Ruin” as a noun always also presupposes “ruin” as a verb and adjective - a structure is ruined (verb) rendering it a ruined (adjective) structure, and then, finally, the ruined structure becomes a ruin (noun) (though, as we shall see, not every ruined structure becomes a ruin proper). Conversely, a ruin cannot be a completely vanished structure. Again, in this case, there is no structure upon which “ruination” may act. We would only refer here to the structure’s absence or its former state and not to the structure itself qua ruin. We can see here, in brief, the fundamental opposition at play with ruins. A ruin is that which is not intact but also that which has not vanished. The continuum between intact and vanished, this domain of decay, is where the ruin resides. That is, the ruin is a structure that was once intact, and is now somewhere on the way towards vanishing. It can thus be expressed as the intersection of the fundamental opposition between not-vanished and not-intact (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

One aspect of the ruin which is not grasped by this framework, but upon which it depends, is memory. Piles of rubble, too, exist in this state between intact and vanished. But while it would be semantically proper to refer to a pile of rubble that was once an intact structure as “ruins,” it would not be conceptually proper without some additional work. In “Nostalgia for Ruins,” Andreas Huyssen writes that “Bombings [...] are not about producing ruins. They produce rubble. But then the market has recently been saturated with stunning picture books and films [...] of the ruins of World War II. In them, rubble is indeed transformed, even aestheticized, into ruin” (Huyssen 2006, 8). The suggestion here is that it is the process of aestheticization that turns a pile of rubble, a ruined structure, into a ruin as such. But the ruin is more than just aestheticized rubble, precisely because the ruin is more than merely aesthetic in the strictest sense. The ruin is also always laden with mnemonic meaning. That is, again per Huyssen, “in the body of the ruin the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible [...] In the ruin, history appears spatialized and built space temporalized” (Huyssen 2006, 9, 13). Thus we can see that ruin then is not merely aesthetic (though aestheticization is perhaps a necessary precondition for understanding), it is also a temporalized, or perhaps more accurately, historicized, space. It is itself the very “stuff” of history.

When we regard the ruin qua ruin we are engaging in what Paolo Virno terms, by way of Henri Bergson, the memory of the present. Our experience of reality, Virno writes, is always at all times bifurcated as memory and perception. The two occur contemporaneously - “[f]ar from being the blurred copy or the belated spectre of immediate experience, the mnemonic trace is its inevitable correlate” (Virno 2015, 11). This simultaneity of perception and memory renders memory useless in the moment, thus Virno quotes Bergson as writing “what is any less useful to an action that is underway, than the memory of the present? This has nothing to teach us, being only the double of perception [...] This is why there is no memory from which our attention is more obstinately turned away” (Virno 2015, 12). The dual nature of experience - memory and perception - is the form of the split between what Virno terms the virtual and the actual. “[P]erception,” Virno writes, “fixes the present as real, complete, resolved in unambiguous given facts; whereas memory limits it within the terms of mere potential, retaining something of its virtual character” (Virno 2015, 14). The actual (or the real) and the virtual (the potential) aspect of any given act or object (objects can, in any event can always be, reformulated as consummated acts) exist, like memory and perception, simultaneously “in one and

the same event” (Virno 2015, 14). It is a seemingly bizarre assertion that memory with its corresponding *passé indéfini* is the realm of the virtual (potentiality), a term most often associated with the future. But, Virno writes (again by way of Bergson), that the virtual (potential) only comes into existence at the moment of the act itself - in “duplicating the real,” the virtual, in the form of memory (which, again occurs contemporaneously with perception, the aspect of experience which fixes the real), “detaches itself into the past, and establishes itself there with a retroactive movement: ‘As reality is created [...] its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this moment that it begins to have been always possible’” (Virno 2015, 16). Memory, then, is the mechanism by which we are able to take the real and cast it back into the past, to see in the present the motion that has brought us here. This is the so-called “memory of the present” - “that which ‘is in the past in its form and of the present in its matter [...] the possible is the *hic et nunc* made into an object of memory, placed under the sign “back then”, re-evoked in the very moment in which it is lived” (Virno 2015, 16). But, we must be careful not to identify the “back then” with a mere set of past events. Rather, the “back then” refers to a *passé indéfini*, to a non-chronologized “*not-now* [...] the unmoveable latency which constitutes the horizon (or context) of each datable event” (Virno 2015, 70). That is, potential can be understood as something like time itself, the inexhaustible faculty which cannot itself be expressed but serves as the latent background upon which historical acts might come into being, even though the act is not identical nor completely expressive of this potentiality itself.

Returning now to ruins, we can see the way in which the ruin as such is necessarily constituted by the memory of the present. When we regard the ruin qua junk-pile or qua aestheticized rubble we are engaging in this dual process but in the “normal” way, where memory of the present is swept by the wayside as the useless double of perception. When we regard the ruin qua ruin, however, the normal veil of uselessness slips away, revealing both the real and mnemonic character of the ruin. We see the ruin as physical form but also as potential; we see the ruin not only as a present real, but also as a past real and as a past potential. To regard the ruin qua ruin is “to spot in a specific performance the disposition or capacity that allows for it; to push the act taking place back within its correlated dynamis [...] When the events now being experienced are inserted anachronistically into the faculty – into the ‘*passé indéfini*’ – they are, as well as being real, always also potential” (Virno 2015, 27).

But we must be careful not to essentialize or universalize. Although the ruin's fundamental attributes – not-vanished, not-intact – may be historically constant, its mnestic status has changed over time. While a historical or ethnographic survey is beyond the scope of the present essay, it is fruitful to contrast, albeit briefly, the Roman conception of ruins with a generalized contemporary “western” conception in order to illustrate both the historicity of the ruin as well as the political situation of the ruin in the contemporary gaze.³ Both Julia Hell and Richard Alston note that in Roman antiquity, the ruin prompted in the ruin-gazer the image of “the site of destruction, death and the fall of Empires” (Alston 2011, 699) and the “spectacle of changing fortunes” (Hell 2019, 96). Hell in particular helps to sharpen Huysen's distinction between the ruin and rubble, which as, already noted, is not merely aesthetic but mnestic as well, by demonstrating that the distinction also crucially depends upon the (political) position of the viewer. Hell writes that while both the ruin and rubble “metonymically signify the undisciplined violence at the heart of the imperial project, in the new ruin consciousness of (post)Augustan imperialism, rubble belongs to the conquered, and ruins are the property of the empire” (Hell 2019, 100). Furthermore, Hell notes that rubble is also temporalized, but in an almost opposite way as the ruin. Whereas, for the Romans, the ruin signified the end of the empire and thus also the “*longue durée* of empire” – that is, imperial time as a time of deferral of the inevitable but also indefinitely deferred ruination of Roman cities and the empire itself – rubble signified the “brief rush of violence, the very moment of victorious conquest and triumph” (Hell 2019, 100) or, the imminence of expansion, the flashing and extinguishing instantiation of empire itself. Thus the distinction between rubble and the ruin was not merely aesthetic, nor even mnestic in quality, but also dependent upon a distinction between ruler and subject.

What was at stake, then, for the Roman ruin gazer, was “scope mastery: a constellation that keeps the (Neo)Roman sovereign, the imperial subject, not the subjected barbarian, in the position of the one who is looking at the ruins of empire – or in the position of the one who is looking at the barbarian, looking” (Hell 2019, 13). In the ruin, the ruler saw the ruins of their own empire, but these ruins could only be regarded as ruins because they were seen from the future-cast perspective of the ruler. The barbarian, who will cause the ruination of Rome in the Roman imperial imaginary, would, by the same relation that caused Rome to regard the vanquished cities of its subjects as rubble, similarly have seen a vanquished Rome as rubble. Thus, the Roman “scope mastery” not only instantiated ruins *as ruins*, but was also again a

form of deferral – for a ruined Rome to be properly considered ruins, there must, paradoxically, still be Romans who may gaze from the position of mastery. The ruin, then, is hardly a neutral object. It is not only invested with a mnemonic quality but also a political quality that, depending upon the ruin-gazing subject, changes the salience of the ruin and highlights the ambiguous nature of the ruin/rubble distinction in the first place.

In the Roman ruin-gazing scenario, the virtual aspect of the ruin is revealed to be the inevitability of death, the potentiality of destruction contained in all things, “the end of empire, empire as endtime” (Hell 2019, 14). In this sense the Roman image of the ruin, not despite but *because* of its evocation of death, still reveals the dual structure of the virtual and which animates the ruin. The *dynamis*, time itself, is here, as elsewhere, the capacity for change. But, this *dynamis* seen from the perspective of the desire for an eternal present, for the deferral of the end, takes on the distinctly melancholic character of Pausanias at Megalopolis: “I am not astounded that the Great City which the Arkadians founded [. . .] should have lost all its beauty and ancient prosperity, or that most of it should be ruins nowadays, because [. . .] I know that fortune alters everything, strong and weak, things at their beginning and things at their ending” (Hell 2019, 96).

Huyssen’s specifically contemporary reading of the ruin, however, flips the Roman scenario on its head. He writes that “[t]his contemporary obsession with ruins hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures” (Huyssen 2006, 8). Gazing at the ruin now, in a time marked by foreclosed or foreclosing political horizons (be it the terminal crisis of climate change or the seeming intractability of capitalism and imperialism in the face of mounting disaster), prompts a nostalgia for the future – for the existence of a future. Whereas for the Romans, with their “eternal empire,” the ruin gazing scenario prompted the gazer to “[know] that the end will eventually come and [hope] that it will not come now” (Hell 2019, 103), the contemporary ruin gazer, in Huyssen’s scenario, hopes that the end will come but doubts that it ever will. Indeed, this is precisely the attraction of the ruin – the embodiment of the negative as the precondition for progress. The previously quoted Benjamin passage is again instructive: “In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” Benjamin 2003, 177-178). While the ruin as a sign of irresistible decay may correspond to both the contemporary and Roman experiences of the ruin, it is in the contemporary that it

becomes a pre-positive moment. The ruin, as thrown back into the past, contains within it all the potential which made it possible and thus carries that potential still (as the virtual and real coexist in every event). It also serves as a real reminder of the past-form – in the ruin, we are reminded of the potentiality of time itself, of the existence of time as such.

In this sense the prior statement that ruins are the very “stuff” of history can be elucidated – “Memory is not ‘historical’ in virtue of the particular content” (Virno 2015, 4), Virno writes, rather it is historical insofar as it is the very thing which allows us to *historicize*, to perceive existence not as a mere chronology, but as a history, as a collection of events and the potentialities that made them so and will continue churning still. So, as our diagram points out, ruins are the product of a neuter axis of the not-vanished and the not-intact. The midway point between what may be perceived and what may only be remembered. It is the form of memory of the present, and, as such, it is the form of history itself.

But, as we shall see in the following section, the nostalgic mania for ruins identified by Huyssen, in a time marked by futurelessness, by an apparent eternal present, leads to strange constructions, which recapitulate this futurelessness upon the ruin-form. This is, again, the problem of the necroaesthetical ruin. But, before explaining the concept of the necroaesthetical, we must build out the expanded field and tackle the new concepts one by one, leaving now the ruin for other grounds. If we understand the ruin as not-vanished and not-intact, we will have to add the terms vanished and intact to the group. The resultant diagram leads to four concepts: Ruins, Consecrated Sites, Ruin-Reproductions, and Necroaesthetical Ruins (see Figure 3).

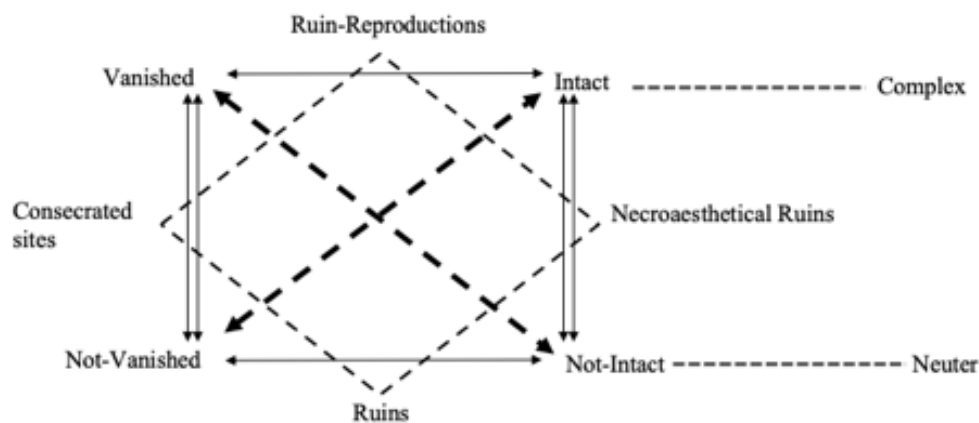


Figure 3

Consecrated Sites

The consecrated site sits at the schema of vanished and not-vanished. It is, despite this paradoxical formulation, perhaps the least complex of the terms in the expanded field and will therefore be dispensed with rather quickly. What does it mean for something to be both vanished and not-vanished? In what state can such a thing exist (and not exist)? In order to tease out the concept we can turn to an illustrative example – the Treblinka death camp. Treblinka, the deadliest of all the Nazi death camps, was entirely destroyed in 1943 in anticipation of the Soviet advance in an attempt to hide the evidence of genocide (The Memory of Treblinka Foundation, n.d.). The structures were all dismantled, and the ground, rife with ashes and human remains, was ploughed over (The Memory of Treblinka Foundation, n.d.). All that remained was a vast, empty field and lone farmhouse (The Memory of Treblinka Foundation, n.d.).

As James Young writes in “The Texture of Memory,” after the war ended and the horrors of Treblinka became known, the site “was long regarded as almost too terrible [...] to even visit” (Young 2000, 186). It was only in 1964, nineteen years after the end of the war, that a monument to the dead was finally constructed on the site (Young 2000, 187). In the intervening nineteen-year period where nothing stood on the site of the camp, we could properly call Treblinka a consecrated site. That is, the physical structures had vanished, and yet their mnemonic power, their signification remained in such a potent fashion that the open field left in its wake was “too terrible” to visit. The real aspect of the site was so terrible, that the virtual aspect, perhaps more terrible still, was able to fill the void left by the real and assume an almost corporeal existence. Here, the virtual characteristic of the site, the potentiality contained within a site like Treblinka, is the potentiality for another Treblinka – potential itself has no moral valence. Such was the power of the place that it was as if the structures had remained intact, still occupying the field, precluding the construction of anything else. Thus, the site is both vanished, in the physical sense, and not-vanished, in the mnemonic sense.

It must be noted that not all remembered but physically vanished sites are consecrated sites, even powerfully remembered ones. The consecration of the site consists precisely in the fact that nothing new can be built upon it, that it lies empty even as it bursts with meaning. The moment that the memorial was constructed in Treblinka, it ceased to be a consecrated site as

such, even though it retained certain characteristics by virtue of the fact that the site still stands primarily as an open field.

Ruin-Reproduction

In the combination of the complex axis – vanished and intact – we have the ruin-reproduction. The ruin-reproduction finds its expression in the faithful reproduction of an existent ruin or a once existent ruin now fully vanished, (the advent of digital reconstruction technology adds a new dimension to the ruin-reproduction, and indeed to the entire expanded field, but we will only concern ourselves here with physical reproductions). Thus, it is both conceptually and, within the Klein group, spatially, the direct inverse of the ruin. The original ruin that is being reproduced need not currently exist in physical form, it is enough that the original once existed, (it is important, however, that the ruin-reproduction cannot consciously take a fictional ruin as its referent. If this were the case then the ruin-reproduction would not be a reproduction at all but only a representational work, itself an “original” of sorts).

We have seen a recent example of the ruin-reproduction in the 2/3 scale reproduction of Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph – destroyed by ISIS in 2015 – unveiled in London in 2016 (Raya 2016). The Arch, built using 3D printing technology, was intended to stand, in the words of Boris Johnson, “in defiance of the barbarians who destroyed the original” (Brown 2016).⁴ In Palmyra, the Arch stood at the entrance to the Grand Colonnade; in London, it stood in the centre of Trafalgar Square. Later, in New York City, the Arch stood in City Hall Park, and as of the time of this writing, the reproduced Arch has been displayed in Dubai, Florence, and Arona as well (Gulf News 2018). The logic of the monument – the inseparability of the architecture from the *hit et nunc* of its creation, i.e., “the tangible expression of permanence or, at the very least, duration” (Auge 2008, 48) which, though it may take on different significations, is, as an expression of duration, always anchored to the originary time – to which the original Arch corresponded, is entirely vitiated by the ruin-reproduction, which borrows from the logic of modernist sculpture as articulated by Krauss, “a kind of sitelessness [...] an absolute loss of place [...] the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential” (Krauss 1979, 34). But the ruin-reproduction extends the sitelessness of modernist sculpture even further. That is, whereas the modernist sculpture, in its sitelessness, is a self-referential qua auratic work of art, the ruin-reproduction is the paradoxical and always already failed embodiment of the signified without a signifier.

We can tease out this line of thinking with reference to a distant relative of the ruin-reproduction – the eighteenth-century folly.⁵ There is, between the folly and the ruin-reproduction, a facial similarity – both are facsimiles of ruined structures (the folly often took this form though it also took, and continues to take, many other forms as well). The similarities, however, end there. With follies, the fabricated ruin need not have an actual referent – rather, as pure ornamentation, they may exist as simulacra, copies without originals. In a sense, follies are self-referential as ornamental works, but as pure ornament they are also, to a certain degree, formally intended to be lost in their environment. Thus, while they may be taken alone as ornament, they must also be taken as only a constituent part of the grander manicured garden, or site-construction project, which also occupies the complex axis of the Krauss’s Klein Group (as both landscape and architecture). Indeed, a too close adherence to any kind of historical structure may call the entire ornamental project into question – hew too closely to the original historical structure and the ornamental value is replaced, in part, by a historical and other site-specific signification.

With the reproduced ruin, the intentions are entirely opposite. The appearance of historical verisimilitude is of the greatest importance, and even where the ruin falls short of this goal (as it must by its very nature as reproduction), the ruin-reproduction is intended to refer not to itself as reproduction or as ornament, but rather to refer only back to the original referent-ruin. The signification is precisely such that the signifier must be lost – the ruin-reproduction is an attempt at an impossible pure signification. In this sense, it does not matter that the reproduction of the Palmyrene Arch is, even at first glance, an obviously artificial, poorly rendered version of the original. It is irrelevant because if the intention behind the ruin-reproduction is realized, then the viewer won’t even “see” the new Arch at all. Its entire purpose is to become itself invisible as an object.

It is only if the ruin-reproduction is understood in this way that Boris Johnson’s statement makes any sense. In the event of its destruction, cheap plastic key-chain reproductions of the Eiffel Tower could never be understood as a protest against its destroyers. The ruin-reproduction is only saved from the commodity junk-pile by virtue of its formal goals. If the ruin-reproduction were to refer to itself at all – as reproduction, as reproducible and fungible and commodifiable – then its political significance would be lost because its intended signification

would be lost. It only acts in defiance of the destroyers (though, of course, this “defiance” is highly suspect) of the original because it is intended, in its signification, to *be the original*.

Thus, the ruin-reproduction is both siteless and not. On the one hand, the ruin-reproduction, particularly when made with 3D printing technology, is both movable and fungible, and, in its impossible formal dream of pure signification, only visible in any specific place due to the limitations of the physical world. On the other hand, however, as an impossible dream of pure signification, the ruin-reproduction is also *pure site*, the doomed attempt at realizing the “site” abstracted from the physical site, without even the original physical metonymic site-signifying referent.

The Necroaesthetical Ruin

This is the end stage – the stage in which the ruin itself is ruined, in which history begins to die. This is the necroaesthetical ruin – the schema of intact and not-intact. The necroaesthetical ruin is, on the one hand, not intact insofar as it incorporates, in part, the traditional ruined structure of the null axis. On the other hand, the necroaesthetical ruin also mingles reproduced or fabricated “ruined” elements with the already ruined structure. Thus, certain parts of the necroaesthetical ruins are in a state of decay in the sense contemplated by the null axis, and certain parts are entirely new, entirely intact as new constructions, and are perhaps, depending upon their material, more or less incapable of decay. Thus, the necroaesthetical ruin can be seen as the hybrid, both conceptually and spatially, of the complex and null axes. Both the ruin-reproduction and the necroaesthetical ruin are parasitic upon the existence of an already existent (or in the case of the ruin-reproduction, also the once existent) ruin in the sense established by the null axis. That is, the fabricated or reproduced aspects of the necroaesthetical ruin, without the existent ruin with which they mingle, lapse into ruin-reproduction, or simply into folly or other fully intact structure (existing wholly outside of the expanded field).

The term “necroaesthetical” itself requires explication and will serve as a way into the discussion of why the shoddiness of the final necroaesthetical ruin product is an almost necessary part of the project. The term must be understood in relation to necropolitics, from which it derives its name and significance. Necropolitics, coined by Achille Mbembe, refers to the “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” and the “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003, 39-40). It sees the locus of

sovereignty not in the biopower of Foucault – “that domain of life over which power has taken control” (Mbembe 2003, 2) – but rather in “the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003, 1), that is, the domain of death. As Professors Brian Daniels and Emily O’Dell point out, necropower has traditionally been applied only to persons, but it is exercised over cultural heritage as well. O’Dell reads the destruction of sufi shrines in Mali as expressing the idea that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty may also reside in who condemns the *already dead* to death” (O’Dell 2013, 508). Daniels links the idea of necropower to Raphael Lemkin’s understanding of genocide as comprised of two possible constituent acts – barbarism, or the destruction of human life, and vandalism, the destruction of cultural heritage. “Mbembe,” Daniels writes, “focuses only upon the first: on the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Lemkin encourages us to take seriously the harm that the power and the capacity to destroy treasures of art and historical archives has for the group coherence, identity, and survival” (Daniels 2014, 6).

This expanded understanding of necropolitics beyond the forms of violence perpetrated against persons into violence perpetrated against objects (which is also, indirectly, always against persons as well), should prompt us also to consider other possible extensions or correlates. The term necroaesthetical has been previously used to describe representations of death or the use of dead matter for aesthetic purposes (e.g. taxidermy - though not without underscoring certain political ramifications as well) (Springer and Turpin 2016), but here we will be utilizing the term to focus on the necropolitical dimensions of the necroaesthetical.

In what sense does the necroaesthetical ruin participate in the necropolitical project? While certain aspects of the necroaesthetical ruin are reproduced or fabricated, the intended or implicit signification of the necroaesthetical ruin is wholly distinct from the ruin-reproduction. The ruin-reproduction is not self-referential, indeed it is self-erasing; it aims to adopt, entirely, the signification of the original referent, to be pure signification. The necroaesthetical ruin, however, is very much self-referential, indeed, in a sense, it begins to destroy the signification of the ruin upon which it establishes its parasitic existence. Though certain more benign examples of the necroaesthetical ruin may be potentially intended to be lost within the ruin itself, the self-referentiality is inevitable once the ruse is noticed by the viewer.

The way in which the necroaesthetical ruin accomplishes this erasure is again elucidated by Virno. Whereas the “memory of the present” was shown to be part and parcel of the ruin as such, it is in *déjà vu*, also termed “false recognition,” that the necroaesthetical ruin finds its phenomenological counterpart. *Déjà vu* arises, Virno writes, “when the past-form, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-content, which the present will repeat with obsessive loyalty – that is to say, when the possible-present is exchanged for a real-past” (Virno 2015, 18). *Déjà vu* is the false recognition of an event as something that has already occurred, chronologically speaking. It is an application of the mnemonic faculty not as it pertains to the virtual, but rather as it pertains to the real. It thus voids the present of its virtual content, turning what is normally a dual process of memory and perception into something like pure perception.⁶ “It identifies,” Virno writes, “a faculty with the sum of its objectifications. It reabsorbs the past-in-general back into the chronological sequence of time” (Virno 2015, 31).

The ruin regarded *qua* ruin animates the mnemonic faculty in the name of the virtual, it lays bare the potentiality of history, and in historicizing the present, lays bare the potentiality of the present as well. But, as has already been stated, with the necroaesthetical ruin the situation is exactly the opposite. Voiding the present of its virtual content and reducing it to vulgar chronology is to deny the political potentialities of both past and present. That is, if the present is void of virtual content, if it is all real all the time, then we cannot historicize the present as potential, cannot send the present moment back into the past as anything other than a chronologically prior real. Virno writes that this *déjà vu*

induces the state of mind based on which people are led to conclude that history is now exhausted, that ‘there is never anything new [...] each moment [is] a repetition of the past [...] Since the present is dressed in the clothes of an irrevocable past, these people must renounce any influence on how the present plays out. It is impossible to change something that has taken on the appearances of memory [...] The individual at the mercy of the *déjà vu* is her own epigone. To her eyes, the historical scansion of events is suspended or paralysed; the distinction between ‘before’ and ‘after’, cause and effect, seems futile and even derisory (Virno 2015, 31-32).

The necroaesthetical ruin comes back into view. In the mingling of the new and the old, the necroaesthetical ruin is precisely the form of this *déjà vu*, this false recognition. It transforms

the ruin, in which we come into contact with the very form of history, into an anti-history, into an object of the present. It recapitulates the object-form, the real, of the ruin without in any sense recapitulating its virtual form as well. It mistakes the process of ruination, the potentiality of ruination inherent in all structures (which always also signals the potential of the present), for its objectification. This is why the necroaesthetical ruin depends upon the insertion of newly fabricated pieces into the pre-existing ruin – the ruin as such and the new components are levelled onto the same plane, that is, the ruin is perceived as a pre-given unity, an intact object, instead of a decaying structure. Thus both the original parts and the fabricated parts, as well as the resulting false-unity, are to be perceived merely as *objects*, the insertion of the new objects revealing this debased perception of the ruin.

This objectification, again, finds its counterpart in Mbembe's necropolitics. He writes, quoting Bataille, "the sovereign world [...] is the world in which the limit of death is done away with. Death is present in it, its presence defines that world of violence, but while death is present it is always there only to be negated, never for anything but that ...' Since the natural domain of prohibitions includes death, among others (e.g., sexuality, filth, excrement), sovereignty requires 'the strength to violate the prohibition against killing'" (Mbembe 2003, 16). The necroaesthetical ruin operates as an exercise of necropolitical power – it is the negation of death (or rather, decay) but still, death is present within it in the ruin-host.

But, to use the language of Jasbir Puar, the exercise of sovereignty displayed by the necroaesthetical ruin does not occur "primarily through the vector of 'let die' or 'make die,'" but rather is more akin to Puar's concept of maiming, which "functions as 'will not let die' and, its supposed humanitarian complement, 'will not make die'" (Puar 2017, 139). She continues, "What kind of sovereignty is being articulated when the right to kill is enacted as the right to maim, to target both bodies and infrastructure for debilitation? This element of biopolitics entails targeting for death but not killing" (Puar 2017, 139). This maiming reveals itself as a form of intolerable stasis imposed upon the maimed – "will not let die" is not the same as "let live" but is rather a deferral of the death sentence already given, life under the sign of death. In this sense, the necroaesthetical ruin is not only an objectification of the ruin, but also a perversion of the virtual characteristic itself – the reduction of history into chronology, of the decay-rebirth tension into mere deferral. The necroaesthetical ruin transgresses the boundary of death in the sense used by Mbembe and Bataille by deferring it endlessly while responding to the

acts of violence (natural or otherwise) which occasion the reconstructions in the first place. And in so doing, it negates the negative moment, the potential of decay as precondition for rebirth.

The necroaesthetical ruin, then, marks the return of the Roman ruin-gazer scenario and sense of imperial time, a time which, Hell writes, “emphasizes duration as the effect of deferral.” The necropolitical power, like the Romans, sees in the ruin qua ruin the end of its reign but in a markedly contemporary form. With means unavailable to the Romans, the contemporary necropolitical power is, in an almost literal sense, able to *stall time* in the form of the necroaesthetical ruin and therefore defer the inevitable disruption of the desired stasis (the figure of the living-dead reappears – the intact and not-intact). The necroaesthetical is not only technologically contemporary, but is also animated by the same contemporary nostalgia for ruins identified by Huyssen. It is only in an age in which such a nostalgia exists that the necroaesthetical ruin gains this political salience in the first place. Thus, it is no accident that we see the necroaesthetical appearing in Syria, in which a struggling regime and an aspirational imperial power seek to reconstitute their control over their populace and sphere of influence, respectively.

The necroaesthetical ruin process can be repeated for as long as the ruin upon which it establishes its parasitical relationship still exists. If the necroaesthetical ruin process is repeated, however, until the eventual disintegration of the ruin proper, each original brick replaced by a facsimile, then the necroaesthetical ruin lapses into ruin reproduction. But, importantly, the signification is different. Whereas the ruin reproduction is intended as pure signification, prompting the viewer to “see” only the real ruin, the necroaesthetical ruin may replace the actual ruin entirely. It becomes the ruin, but because it is not itself a ruin at all, it replaces only the ruin-object, and points to the very absence of the ruin’s virtual dimension. The necroaesthetical ruin, then, robs the present of its virtual content by insisting in its form that the present is all there is, all there will ever be.

In the necroaesthetical ruin we see the beginnings of the end of history, the condition identified by Virno as prompted by *déjà vu*. The fight against change is a fight against life as much as it is a fight against death. Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that it is a perverted mirror image of death’s permanence; a fight against change, the desire for perpetual mnemonic and

aesthetic stasis, is a fight against life *on the side of death*. Huysssen references Alexander Kluge as speaking of “the attack of the present on the rest of time” which Huysssen relates to the idea of the reproduction, of the “reverse face-lifting” of making the new look old (Huysssen, 2006, 10). But, in light of our understanding of the present as virtual and real, we must add an addendum to Kluge’s statement if we are to be completely accurate – the necroaesthetical ruin is “the attack of the present on the rest of time,” including on the present itself.

Returning again to the example of Syria, Daniels writes that:

[f]or Syrians during the war, such as my colleague in Gaziantep, being in pain was to experience the randomness of barrels filled with explosives dropped by helicopters; to have roadblocks and fortifications everywhere; to recall painful bruises and memories resulting from interrogations and beatings by police, local warlords, and soldiers for hire; to have family disappeared; to feel the want of food and safety; and to dodge the compulsory military draft and live in the fear of being caught. At such moments, opportunities for resistance are circumscribed (Daniels 2014, 4).

Or consider the words of Maher Najjar, the deputy general of Gaza’s Coastal Municipalities Water Utilities, regarding the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza, as quoted by Puar: “It will take more than US\$20 million to rebuild the water and sewage networks, but there’s no way they can be rebuilt under blockade. We have the total collapse of all essential services and there’s nothing we can do about it. Believe me, it would be better if the Israelis just dropped the nuclear bomb on Gaza and get done with it” (Puar 2017, 140).⁷ Puar continues: “It is as if withholding death – will not let or make die – becomes an act of dehumanization: the Palestinians are not even human enough for death” (Puar 2017, 140). The living-dead, as the already-condemned to death, has no future. This is the subject under the necropolitical regime. The necroaesthetic ruin gives physical, necroaesthetic form to this feeling.

Indeed, as Mbembe writes, the recognition of the perception of the Other as a threat, as something that must be destroyed, underpins the critique of modernity as a process of reification, or the “*becoming-object* of the human being” (Mbembe 2003, 18). The object has only a chronological *after*, but no future (used here as an aspect of historical, not chronological, time). Likewise, the necroaesthetical ruin’s reification of the ruin form, the becoming-object of the ruin, strips the ruin of its future (i.e. decay). In both cases, reification is the defense mechanism

of a necropolitical order which establishes its sovereignty through the administration of death itself - this feeling and form of unchangingness being the antithesis of revolutionary desire. As Virno writes, “the ‘end of history’ [...] arises precisely when the very condition of possibility of history comes into view” (Virno 2015, 33). The necropolitical power of the necroaesthetic ruin is that much stronger because it is parasitic upon the ruin in which the form of history is found. In Syria, the necroaesthetical ruin has been constructed at the time of crisis on the ruin precisely to mask the potentiality of the crisis by masking the potentiality of the ruin.

Conclusion

On the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the great eighteenth-century Italian etcher of ruins, Huyssen writes, “[i]nstead of *nature morte*, Piranesi created an *architettura morta*, which not only reminds the present of its own transitoriness but seems to include a warning about a culturally destructive forgetting of the past [...] He rather remains haunted by the threatening aura of ruins, by their oppressive interlocking of past and present, nature and culture, death and life” (Huyssen 2006, 17-19). With the introduction of the expanded field, we can see that the warning is as dire as ever, that even the threatening aura itself exists in a state of fragility. The ruin, as the form of history, is not the only occupant of the ruin-theoretical discourse, and we find in the necroaesthetical ruin a constant threat. A threat not only to the ruin’s own existence qua ruin, but to history itself and to the people who must continue on, whether or not history manages to continue on along with them.

Notes

- 1] The diagram requires a small bit of explanation. The bottom horizontal axis, comprised of the two negativities, is referred to as the “neuter” whereas the top horizontal axis, comprised of the two positivities, is referred to as the “complex.” The dotted diagonal arrows in the center of the diagram, called “deixes,” express the idea that each positivity is also expressible as its diagonally opposite negativity (i.e. “architecture” is just another way to say “not-landscape”). The double vertical arrows are called “schemas” and represent one of the two types of contradictions (positive and negative of the same term), while the horizontal single arrows are “axes” and represent the other type of contradiction (term and its opposite). The broken lines forming the outside diamond form, at each point, the concept born of the relation between the terms on the two base points of the resultant triangle.
- 2] It should be noted that “memory sites” does not refer in this piece to only ruins, but rather includes a vast array of possible memory sites, such as, inter alia, museums, parks, and public art. Thus, while the discussion is valuable in its own right, it is of limited use for narrower issue at hand.
- 3] As the following paragraphs will show, the “ruin” is, to a certain degree, in the eye of the beholder.

4] Notice here the Neo-Roman “scope mastery” language. The barbarian is ISIS, the Roman is the “west” - in Palmyra, the “west” looks at the barbarian, looking, in order to reconstitute itself as the entity which gazes upon ruins instead of rubble.

5] Follies are structures built for ornamental purposes, primarily in manicured gardens, that often harkened back to certain architectural styles, sometimes in the form of fabricated ruins.

6] It is only something like pure perception because, Virno notes, experience is always, no matter what, comprised of both memory and perception. *Déjà vu* is merely the illusion that it is not.

7] Gaza, perpetually in ruins as the result of Israel airstrikes, is another prime example of the scope-mastery at play in ruin gazing the conquered, the “barbarian” of the Israeli apartheid regime, is reduced to rubble in every outbreak of violence, which again and again instantiates the ruling regime in a flash of violence.

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Biography

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